

Article

Origins of Dualism and Nondualism in the History of Religion and Spiritual Practice

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Abstract: In a previous article we proposed that spiritual traditions and practices emerged to counter-balance humans inherent “dualism”, or perceived separation from the world around us, by cultivating experiences of “subject-object nonduality” more commonly referred to as “unification with the divine” or “enlightenment”. This implies that religions (social and political institutions ostensibly based in spiritual practices) similarly aim towards overcoming the separation of self and other. However, many religions include dualistic elements. In particular, many religions incorporate “ethical dualism” in which certain individuals and groups are seen as essentially “good” or “bad”, a feature not seen in nondual traditions. Here, we explore this seeming paradox, highlighting an intriguing correspondence between the degree to which religions include dualistic or nondualistic elements and, respectively, the prevalence of conflict or cooperation as the organizing principle in their associated social context. We find major “dualistic” religions to be generally traceable to pastoral societies largely organized around intergroup conflict, whereas major “nondual religions” are generally traceable to societies in which large-scale cooperation and rule-based behavior was necessary for collective survival. Finally, we apply this pattern to the modern world, speculating that large-scale cooperation and rule-based behavior in modern society may be currently encouraging the renewal of nondual practices in modern social and political institutions that is indicated by the growing popularity of “spiritual but not religious” groups, and that this renewal of nondual practices may in turn set the frame for and reinforce behavior that will be necessary to address the historic challenges of our day like climate change and democratic backsliding.

Keywords: history of religion; sociology of religion; nonduality; human condition; spirituality; spiritual but not religious; Buddhism; Christianity



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1. Introduction

In a previous paper we explored the possibility that spiritual traditions and practices developed to help humans to manage a challenging condition that arose as a result of human exceptionalism (Henning and Henning 2021). We noted that the human mind has a key distinguishing feature: a degree of mental self-awareness and subjectivity, or subject-object duality, that appears to be unmatched in the animal kingdom (Henning and Henning 2021). Dualistic mental experience—in which the mental “subject” is separated from the “objects” in the subject’s environment, is a precondition for our ability to think abstractly, perceive time, construct narratives, invent tools, and use symbols (Buonomano 2017; Suddendorf 2013). While these abilities are likely to exist in degrees throughout the animal kingdom, it would appear that their elaboration in humans has contributed significantly to our species’ remarkable evolutionary success.

However, while dualistic mental experience has largely enabled our evolutionary advantage, it has also brought new challenges, termed the “human condition” by Malraux in 1933 (Malraux 1933). These challenges of the human condition include but are not limited to: (1) the challenge of self-knowledge/knowing who we are, (2) the challenge of insecurity/knowing our value in comparison with others, and (3) the challenge of mortal

anxiety/knowing that our time is limited (Henning and Henning 2021). Similar ideas include St. Augustine's God-shaped hole in our heart; and also the Buddhist concept of '*dukkha*' or suffering, which has been described by comparative philosopher David Loy as the experience of "lack" (Loy 2018).

Spiritual practices appear to have developed to meet this need, to address the challenges brought on by our dualistic mental experience (Henning and Henning 2021). Most spiritual practices approach this goal by reducing the duality of subject and object, attempting to overcome our subjective isolation, and strengthening the tenuous relationship that we have with ourselves, with others, and with the world (Loy 1988). Practices include meditation, or the production of trance states through group chanting, singing, or movement, in which the sense of self is minimized in the state of flow. The highest aim of many spiritual traditions ('enlightenment', 'unification with God', 'moksha', 'gnosis', etc.) involves the ineffable and rare experience of "absolute nonduality", in which the subject-object/perceiver-perceived relationship breaks down completely (and as a result the enlightenment experience may not even be rightly called an "experience") (Henning and Henning 2021; Loy 1988; Deguchi et al. 2021). One of the more noteworthy elements of this enlightenment "experience" is that everything and everyone is revealed to be of the same importance and value. Of course, while spiritual practices may aim in this direction, the practices themselves are not sufficient to reliably produce experiences of absolute nonduality. However, even a reduction in the duality of self and other would appear to remedy the challenges of the human condition to a degree corresponding to the depth of the practice and the resulting experience. Thus when we talk about 'nondual spiritual practice', we refer to practices which move us in the direction of nonduality, including those mentioned above, as well as performing ceremonies to feel the togetherness with others, with our ancestors, with the world and with local 'spirits' around us. Even acts of generosity and compassion, and interpersonal bonding, go in the direction of nonduality. In general, nondual practices and traditions are characterized by efforts to unify with the world, as well as care for all living beings. Buddhism and Taoism are prominent examples of a nondual tradition. In fact, evidence from studies of the effects of psychoactive plant compounds such as psilocybin suggest that reductions in the duality of self and other do produce reductions in core negative aspects of the human condition (Bobbett 2017; Bunch 2009; Griffiths et al. 2016).

However, while many spiritual practices endeavor to mitigate the problems of the human condition by reducing the duality of self and other, other traditions aim to address these same problems in ways that are, paradoxically, distinctly dualistic. Instead of seeking to undo isolation through community or dance or compassion and gratitude, dualistic spiritual practices aim to address the tension between subject and object, spirit and body, by further distancing one from the other, for instance by attempting to purify the spirit by purging the corrupting influence of the body. Practices in this realm can include extreme asceticism or fasting or flagellation of the body, or purity laws intended to maintain separation between the pure self and a corrupting material world. Subject-object and self-other duality appear to share a common way of interpreting the world with another form of duality, ingroup-outgroup duality. While dualistic traditions often do include nondual practices like chanting and praying together, efforts at unification, and acts of charity and care, they occur in the context of sharpened ingroup/outgroup divides, and often under the auspices of "saving" an unenlightened outgroup from ignorance or sin. Christianity and Islam are prominent examples of dualistic traditions, although they each have nondual off-shoots, including the Christian Mystics and Sufism.

If spirituality developed in order to address the challenges of the human condition by reducing the duality of subject and object or self and other, then how do we explain the continued prevalence of dualistic traditions and practices in parallel with the nondual varieties? Here, we propose that this seeming paradox can be resolved by exploring the historical times and societal contexts in which these traditions developed—while the drive to reduce the duality of self and other is likely to be universal, the practices and traditions

which have developed to reduce this duality either achieve this goal through a “global nonduality” of unification with the entire world, or through a more limited “group-level nonduality” where duality between groups is preserved. In this latter case an “ethical dualism” emerges, in which ingroup and outgroup are understood to be differentiated on the basis of their being essentially “good” or “bad”. We find that in contexts where large scale cooperation was the way to survive, this inclination towards nonduality manifested in “globally nondual” traditions, practices, and worldviews. Conversely, in contexts characterized by intergroup conflict, this innate inclination towards nonduality manifested instead in “group-level nonduality”. In other words, both nondual and dualistic traditions and practices would appear able to ameliorate the challenges of the human condition, albeit to differing extents and with different societal and environmental spin-off effects.

Notably, this perspective can help us understand spiritual and religious practices and traditions as distinct and contextualized approaches to the same goal: to address the challenges of the human condition by reducing the duality of subject and object. Identifying this key intrinsic dimension of spiritual and religious traditions allows distinct traditions and practices to be analyzed relative to one another. Instead of simply classifying them into categories based for instance on the type of activity they may involve (i.e., music, movement, or prayer), or the type or number of gods they may pray to, distinct traditions and practices can be compared and evaluated based on the extent to which, and how, they approach their key function and underlying common goal of addressing the challenges of the human condition by reducing the duality of subject and object or self and other.

2. Nondual Practices and Traditions in Early Animistic Society

As far as we can tell, early animistic societies were largely organized around social norms which centered on the interrelations between people, with a focus on sharing with everyone who might be present at a given time, regardless of family relation (Bird-David 1999). In contrast to the modern dualistic view in which human are set apart from a natural world comprised essentially of resources for humans to use, in animistic societies the natural world is viewed nondually as imbued with life, sentience, and sacredness, and humans are considered to be embedded within and inseparable from it. In this view, animals, trees, rocks, and wind may be granted personhood in the same way that a human is (Bird-David 1999).

Although spread all over the world, in general animistic societies appear (from archaeological evidence and case studies of currently existing groups) to have made use of drumming, dancing for long hours through the night, singing, and chanting, all practices to enhance group cohesion and produce ecstatic experiences (Winkelman and Baker 2010, p. 109). Less social, more individual practices like soulflight and visionary or mystical experiences, often under the influence of psychedelics, were part of how they learned to accept death as being part of the whole world. In forager communities, these practices were typically guided by shamans.

A central aspect of shamanic healing practices was to overcome the problem of human isolation. The primary ailment that shamans dealt with is described as “soul loss”. “Soul loss” refers to an injury to the core of one’s being that manifests as despair, disharmony, an inability to find meaning in life; a loss of belonging and closeness with others within the community; a disconnection from those aspects of life which provide vitality and flourishing. This is surely reminiscent of Malraux’s “human condition”, if not a remarkably precise description of it. Reintegrating these individuals involved sacrificial ceremonies to help appease bad spirits and demons. (Winkelman and Baker 2010, p. 173; Boyce 1996, chap. 3).

Shamans were not a professional class. They were shamans in the morning and foragers in the afternoon. An individual shaman might communicate their own insights about how the world works, and these insights were of course situated within their worldview, but these views were not part of an orthodox tradition, strictly standardized through a centralized authority. Their position was based on personal spiritual experience, typically a

sort of vision quest that included the momentary experience of death of the 'ego' in the broadest sense. The "spirits" they communicated with were not thought to exist in some place separate and distinct from the world around them, like later religions' ideas of heaven and hell. Rather, the shamans' spirits were of the immediate surroundings, animals and plants, with spirit and material integrated and whole, within a nondual conception of the world.

3. Ethical Dualism and Group-Level Nonduality in Conflictual Semi-Pastoral Societies

In later societies, different worldviews and sociocultural structures gave rise to very different forms of spiritual practices and traditions. In particular, in societies organized around intergroup conflict, where the idea of a global nonduality would not have made sense or fit within the prevailing way of life, a new concept emerged which resolved this disconnect. The concept of "ethical dualism"—in which individuals or groups are understood to be either essentially "good" or "bad" and have a mandate to work toward the defeat of the "bad" and the triumph of the "good"—allowed the spiritual motive to manifest in the development of dualistic traditions offering the benefits of nonduality, if to a limited degree, and restricted to the in-group.

As far as we know, the first state religion that incorporated ethical dualism was Zoroastrianism, the state religion of the Achaemenid empire of ancient Persia (550–330 BCE), then the greatest empire of all time, in what is now Iran. Zoroastrianism offers a powerful example of the extent to which a society's context can influence the development of religious principles there.

Zoroastrianism is based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster. According to the preeminent Zoroastrianism scholar Mary Boyce, Zoroaster lived sometime between 1000 and 1400 BCE, most likely around 1200 BCE, although the precise time of Zoroaster's life has been highly contested, with her own mentor initially placing him several centuries later (Henning 1951). The timeline is obviously important for the question whether Zoroastrianism influenced the Abrahamic religions, or the other way round. The emerging consensus of the last few decades, informed by linguistic studies, seems to be that Zoroastrianism was indeed conceived a long time before Judaism (Mark 2020).

Zoroaster lived in what today is the north-eastern part of Iran, in what would have been a pastoral, semi-nomadic society. All the images in Zoroaster's writings are of a pastoral society (Boyce 1984). Even in the best of times, pastoral nomadic societies exist under conditions of high stress. Drought, floods or climate change can force them to move to find new pasture land for their animals. While farmers can nurture and improve the fertility of their fields, pastoralists just have to take what the steppe offers. In addition, other groups always want your cows. Vigilance and defensive weapons are imperative.

In Zoroaster's time, the situation in Persia was particularly fluid, with nomadic migrants known as the Yamnayas starting to settle in 1800–1600 BCE, often clashing with the already settled populations. Around 700 BCE the Yamnayas settled in western Persia as well, completing the invasion. Recent genetic analysis has identified the Yamnayas as the ancestral node from where the Indo-European languages and pastoral based culture spread over most of the western world (Krause and Trappe 2022; Reich 2018). Before coming to Persia, they had already established themselves in the Pontic Steppe in southern Russia and Kazakhstan, north of the Caspian Sea, in about 3600 BCE, where they took advantage of the recent domestication of the horse and the invention of the wheel. Based on these inventions they were able to drive their Longhorn cattle over long distances within the steppe region. In conflicts they relied upon weapons made of copper, daggers and axes, at a time when the farmers in Europe only had stone tools (Woudhuizen 2018). Changing weather patterns, droughts, and their own capabilities in mobility, enticed the Yamnaya to migrate to other areas. In 2800 BCE they first arrived in Europe where they quickly replaced the existing farming population, and up to 90% of the male population. Still today the Yamnayas dominate the genetic makeup of particularly northern and central Europe (Krause and Trappe 2021). Their Indo-European languages and Gods, weapons

and worldviews did not only take over Europe, but also Asia towards China, then northern India and, lastly in 1600 BCE Afghanistan and Persia.

Zoroaster lived in this aggressive environment, dominated by a 'show of male virility' (Woudhuizen 2018), with half settled, half nomadic groups connecting with and fighting each other. According to Boyce, an extremely high incidence of conflict and the urgency of questions about how to overcome it are at the very center of the ideas of Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1979, 1996). "It was during this turbulent and restless age, it seems, when might ruled rather than law, that Zoroaster lived, and sought a revelation of the purpose of man's troubled day on earth" (Boyce 1979, p. 28).

A priest himself, Zoroaster introduced a major innovation, enabling the adoption of this conflictual social context to a religious one, through what is now called 'ethical dualism'. In Zoroastrian cosmology, there exists a benevolent God (Ahura Mazda) and a malevolent god (Angra Mainyu). Our task as human beings is to support the good and fight the bad, and at the end of our life we will be judged on our performance. In this judgement, we have to cross a bridge into heaven but may fall off into hell beneath, depending on our past choices. In this scheme, personal accountability replaces the prior view in which bad actions are understood to be the result of bad spirits having temporarily invaded the culprit's body. Instead of temporarily being overcome by malevolent spirits who must be appeased, in ethical dualism bad actions indicate the essential badness of one's soul. It would appear that this innovation and the extent to which ethical dualism fit within the sociocultural patterns of the time was appreciated, because a neighboring king made Zoroastrianism the state religion.

Ethical dualism allowed individuals within the conflictual, pastoral society, to still experience an improvement in their challenges with the human condition, by reducing the duality of self and other, albeit within the dualistic frame. The structural nature of the society, with high levels of inter-group conflict, would appear to limit the plausibility of a globally non-dual worldview, but a limited nonduality could be achieved within the in-group, while deepening divisions with the outgroup, allowing a limited solution to the challenges of the human condition, within the structural and social dynamics and conditions of the time and place.

When this dualistic mode, which trades deeper outgroup divisions for deepened in-group bonds, is extended out to a grand scale, it can cause problems. In-group good deeds and in-group charity can calm and unify many disparate groups into a larger, better organized and more powerful entity, and in good times a state organized around ethical dualism can flourish economically and culturally. It becomes possible to organize big projects or armies; it gives a basis for legitimizing the enforcement of rules. However, in times of stress or crisis, the 'good ones' easily band together against those identified as the 'not so good ones' or worse, the bad or 'evil ones'. In times of great challenge or conflict, the moderation and tolerance promoted through the framework of ethical dualism can quickly devolve into scapegoating whole groups, persecuting and even killing the 'other' both inside and outside of the kingdom, even defining entire out-group states as 'evil empires'. At this point, rules and norms cease to hold any power. Indeed, Ancient Greece became the Satan of Persian lore. On this basis it has been argued that a metaphysics of ethical dualism perpetuates conflict, war and destruction (Winkelman and Baker 2010).

While Zoroaster himself is thought to have been eventually assassinated, according to a contemporary source cited by Boyce (Boyce 1996, p. 192) the later Persian Achaemenid empire became the most expansive and powerful empire of its time. This may be in part due to its adoption of Zoroastrianism at the state level, which made it possible to integrate formerly unruly groups into a large society based on the same values. Ethical dualism offers a degree of meaningfulness to the individual's life, in that they have a clear task, to banish the "badness" which has contaminated the otherwise pure state of "good", with the ultimate goal of achieving a state of permanent goodness. It does appear that there was in fact a high degree of 'goodness' administered within the empire, in the form of acts of charity and tolerance. King Cyrus, the founder of the dynasty, is famous for freeing the

Jews who were held as captives in Babylon since the destruction of the First Temple. In 539 BCE they were allowed to go home to what is now Israel, an act of graciousness perhaps unique in history.

All religions of the time communicated with each other, and the periodic benefits, as well as the problematic patterns of ethical dualism can be observed to have spread with it. To analyze this diffusion in detail is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that since Persia was the dominant culture at the time, it was to be expected that their neighbors would adopt some of the characteristics of the empire.

However, while the Jews returning from Babylon surely were impressed with the achievements of Zoroastrianism, they as a group did not adopt the individual-based ethical dualism after reuniting with their brethren who had stayed in Israel, and avoided incorporating ideas of heaven and hell prominently into the Torah (Ehrman 2020).

In contrast, both Christianity and Islam followed the Zoroastrian example and adopted principles of ethical dualism. Christianity and Islam may also have been influenced by the strong dualism of both Platonic philosophy and Manichaeism—the latter of which comes from Gnosticism and strongly values the spirit over the material. It would appear that the dualistic idea of purifying the spirit from the corrupting influences of the body can be traced to the Manichaean influence, as Zoroastrian dualism was limited to the ethical variety, concerning ones essential goodness or badness. Further, in line with the schema we are outlining, the social context during the development of Christianity and Islam was marked by significant conflict due to the decline and collapse of the Roman empire, which also likely influenced the development of Christianity and Islam in a distinctly dualistic direction.

At times both Christianity and Islam supported huge empires, helping to unite the populace by promoting equality and charity. They also promoted spiritual practices like chanting, praying and performing ceremonies that promote feelings of togetherness and belonging for the in-group. They followed the ideal of equality—Jesus tending to the poor, allowing women into his group—which could well be rooted in an experience of absolute nonduality or “enlightenment” by the religions’ founders. However, if there were ever globally nondual roots to both Christianity and Islam, they were soon overwritten by dualistic ideas. Since then both Christianity and Islam have periodically fallen into the pattern of scapegoating opponents in times of crisis and religious fervor, lashing out at those they considered to be heretics, and other kingdoms and religions.

4. Nondual Worldviews in Cooperative and Rule-Based Societies

In contrast to the dualistic worldviews and traditions which developed in conflictual, semi-pastoral societies, in other societies the same underlying need to address the challenges of the human condition by reducing the duality of self and other manifested in a more global nondualism. While the roots of Eurasian culture can be traced to the pastoralist Yamnayas from the steppes, the East Asian cultures generally depended on large scale agricultural projects. This is a key distinction between the Western or Eurasian cultures including Europe, Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan, and the East Asian cultures including China, Korea, Khmer, and Thai.

The East Asian cultures faced the necessity for often large-scale and annually repeated cooperation in harnessing the often deadly power of the great rivers for irrigation, as well as building countless wells and channels to counteract the constant danger of unreliable rainfall. These large scale cooperative efforts enabled an extremely fertile countryside. If the cooperation for whatever reason did not work out, death and destruction would reliably soon follow.

65 years ago, Karl August Wittfogel argued that these large extended irrigation works in Asia gave rise to ‘Asian Despotism’, which he distinguished from the European model of government (Wittfogel 1957). However, large scale irrigation projects alone do not determine how they are administered. As a counter-example, irrigation in Bali is democratically organized, administered by the priests of the island (Lansing 2009). Nonetheless,

the large-scale cooperation of millions of farmers that was needed to tame the big rivers would surely influence the culture of their societies. These projects were massive, for example just one of ancient southern China's irrigation projects provided water to over a million acres (Li and Xu 2006). To support this degree of coordination, extensive rules and regulations were needed, to organize and coordinate who would get water and when. In this arrangement, access to water needed to be regulated not simply by the most powerful, but by those who could administer the system so it was advantageous to the broadest swath of the population. Instead of ensuring despotism, this large-scale cooperation and rule based behavior may in fact have provided a fertile ground for nondual ideas.

We use "rule based" here to refer to a society in which rules are more or less collectively upheld, not simply strictly enforced by a centralized authority. In a rule-based society people agree to and set the rules, and as a result the rules become the structure and framework of that society. A violent despot can also make rules and enforce them, however we would consider this to be a society based on force.

Nondual worldviews were originally developed in India (Buddhism, since 600 BCE) and China (Taoism, since 500 BCE). These worldviews were subsequently sustained in East and South East Asia for centuries (Loy 1988; Deguchi et al. 2021). If, as according to our main hypothesis, spiritual practices developed in response to the challenging results of human exceptionalism, then we would expect nondual ideas to emerge all around the world. However, only in some regions in Asia, they were developed into prominent religions. The prevalence of large-scale cooperation and rule-based behavior could be a key factor in allowing this to happen.

Historically, only the Khmer and Thai kingdoms of the past were completely insulated from the Eurasian cultures of the steppes. They present as flourishing irrigation based cultures. The common people in the Khmer kingdom adopted Theravada Buddhism about 1000 years ago against the caste based Hinduism that the elite had introduced before (Chandler 2008).

During times of conflict nondual worldviews would appear to be naturally challenged. It is also possible that nondual worldviews could be advantageous in times of conflict, because they may facilitate perspective-taking and anticipation of an enemy's next move. However, ultimately war is essentially dualistic. Typically both sides try to dehumanize the other and paint them as "evil" in order to convince everybody to fight as fiercely as possible. In times of external threat, people who would otherwise be proponents of nondual peace must contend with, at least temporarily, a dualistic mode of thought and action. Although conflicts in China rarely involved symmetrical conflict, as when pastoralist groups fought each other in Persia—groups of rice farmers did not make war against other groups of rice farmers—China was not a conflict-free zone; conflict occurred around issues of succession, and in defense against invading societies such as the horse-riding Mongols. China was largely successful in fighting off the steppe people. Even when the Mongols invaded, they gained little cultural influence and they left minimal genetic trace in the indigenous Han population (Krause and Trappe 2022). There were long periods of peace like during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) which is generally described as the Golden Age of Chinese cosmopolitan culture, a high point in history (Lewis 2012). During this mostly peaceful time nondualistic Buddhism became predominant among common Chinese people. China has another major tradition, Confucianism, which also has nondualistic elements, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Confucian statements and writing from Buddhist ones, but Confucianism promotes a hierarchical society, and lacks the key element of nondual systems—an emphasis on the equality of beings and things (Ivanhoe 2017, p. 148).

The Indian subcontinent, like Persia, was invaded by Yamnayas starting in 1800 BCE. The culture the Yamnayas encountered in the Indian subcontinent was already established, based on sedentary farming involving irrigation and relying on the building of wells and channels to make up for irregular rain patterns. These Indo-European migrants successfully implanted their languages and culture in northern India, forming the dominant Brahmin caste. Still today, genetically, Yamnayas are overrepresented in the Brahmin caste (Reich

2018; Krause and Trappe 2022, p. 259). In Indian literature from this period, life is described as a struggle between light and darkness, with a search for order and ultimate reality. Yoga and meditation was practiced already, but within the mostly dualistic framework of early Brahmanism, combined with strict asceticism and purity laws (Basham 1977).

Buddha was not a Brahmin and he transformed the earlier Brahmanic worldview into a nondual one, complete with the telltale signs of strong emphasis on equal importance of everyone and everything and a denunciation of asceticism and the caste system. His supporters were mainly merchants, not Brahmins, who later were instrumental in spreading Buddhist teaching far and wide into Asia along common trade routes.

Eventually the growing power of the renewed Hindu Brahmins (around 1200 CE) resulted in the disappearance of Buddhism from India. Advaita Vedanta could be considered the ideological heir to Buddhism, since it presents as a nondual religion. However, until very recently it did not oppose the caste system, which is peculiar for a religion ostensibly based on a worldview of nonduality in which everybody is of the same value and importance.

Outliers

Japan is an outlier among East Asian nondual cultures. Nonduality in Japan did not accompany large-scale agricultural cooperation as in China, rather Buddhism was imported by the warrior class from China while it was flourishing there during the Tang dynasty. Emphasizing nonduality early on, famously as expressed by the philosopher-priest Dogen (1200–1253 CE), the spiritual practices of Zen stayed strongly nondual, aiming at realization of unity and enlightenment. However, over the centuries Zen developed a distinct dualism that involved elevating Japanese culture over everything else in the world, a development potentially influenced by the larger Shinto religion. This culminated in WWII as evidenced by the shocking support by all the leading priests for the attack on Pearl Harbor, and their defense of the massacres against the Chinese (Victoria 2006).

Tibet is an outlier in the opposite direction. A mainly nomadic pastoralist country, Tibet imported Buddhism first from India about 1500 years ago. In spite of many political conflicts within Tibet among different tribes in the past, Buddhism became widely accepted, maybe because of its close liaison with the prior shamanic spiritual practices. Another possibility is that its remote location and limited natural resources may have necessitated a worldview conducive to existing in harmony with nature. This latter possibility would be consistent with the schema we have outlined, given that remoteness would be expected to influence the degree of conflict and other sociocultural factors which in turn would be expected to influence the type of traditions and practices that could develop there. Today, the exiled leadership of Tibet presents probably the only political holdout of a nondual worldview in a world dominated by conflict and competition.

5. Conclusions

Here, we have outlined a new perspective on the history of religions, organized around the development of nonduality or duality and its relation to the associated social context. Anything more than a cursory overview is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. It would take a team of historians, religious scholars, and philosophers to do this analysis comprehensively. By the same token, however, it is important to identify a forest before gathering the resources necessary to catalogue each individual tree.

We have sought to highlight an intriguing correspondence between the degree of conflict within a society and the development of dualistic worldviews and practices, and, on the other hand, between large-scale cooperative and rule-based behavior and the development of nondual worldviews and practices. Notably, in this view, both the development of dualistic worldviews and practices, and nondual worldviews and practices, are driven by the same need to address the underlying challenges of the human condition resulting from the inherent duality of subject and object that is the root of human exceptionalism.

Distinct social contexts, such as those of structural conflict or cooperation, may influence the kind of worldviews and traditions that develop to meet this core human need.

It has been argued that religion serves the function of enabling social cohesion (Durkheim 1912), and the observations noted here may offer a useful elaboration of this thinking. It may be true that religion serves to support the cohesion of a large group, but the worldviews and traditions and practices which develop within that group, must develop in such a way as to meet the innate needs for a reduction in the duality of self and other, while also fitting within the structural features of the society itself. In other words, religions may develop as either dualistic or nondualistic because, depending on the social context, the innate motive to reduce the duality of self and other can only be addressed by either a dualistic or a nondualistic tradition. In a society in which life is about conflict, a nondualistic tradition would likely be too far a departure from normal ways of thinking to be able to meet the underlying need to a reduction in the duality of self and other, so dualistic traditions developed, which nonetheless meet this core need by promoting spiritual practices that reduce the duality of self and other *within the group* even as distinctions with the outgroup are sharpened. By contrast, in a society in which life is about cooperation, a nondualistic tradition may be more likely to emerge.

This view could have implications for the modern world. Nowadays, the irrigation systems of old are replaced by dams, mechanical wells and powerful machine tools. It would appear that this potential basis for nondualistic worldviews has been disappearing. Today, Western dualistic culture, the legacy of the Yamnayas, reigns everywhere in the world. This legacy can be traced from the spread of the Yamnayas, through the development of Platonic philosophy with its world of distinct objects, and later Cartesian philosophy with its juxtaposition of mind/reason and body.

However, the dominance of dualistic worldviews in the West may be shifting. Amidst the Western dualism which dominates the modern world, a new trend is emerging. In the last 50 years or so, in the technologically most advanced regions of the world, there has been a noticeable and growing interest in spiritual practices with nondual guiding views. Those interested are generally identified as the “spiritual but not religious”, and their numbers have grown considerably, to now comprise 27% of the population, mostly younger and highly educated (Lipka and Grecewicz 2017). While traditional nondual religions have been decaying or have adopted dualistic elements as the social basis for nonduality disappeared, a new social basis for nondual practices appears to be emerging in the former centers of dualistic cultures. Like in Asian history, large-scale cooperation facilitated by advanced technologies and rule-based trade and commerce, commonly referred to as “globalization”, could be a new fertile ground for new nondual practices and ideas to develop.

At the same time, climate change and other modern challenges are global and we know they can only be overcome through large scale cooperation and rule based behavior. On the surface this seems equivalent to the dualistic way of uniting within, to face an enemy outside. However, nature is not an enemy outside. We cannot succeed by destroying nature. Instead, we have no choice but to unite to transform our relationship with nature, to understand where we have gone wrong—not where nature has gone wrong—and how to adjust our behavior with the aim to allow all living systems to flourish. In this context, nondual worldviews would appear to be helpful. While both dualistic and nondualistic worldviews can be useful in organizing large groups of people, the nondual approach does not rely on deepening in-group/out-group tensions and a perpetuation of conflict, destruction, domination, and exploitation. Instead, a nondual approach could open new avenues of thought and action that can support us in a new epic, cooperative and rule-based effort to survive together (Winkelman and Baker 2010). Of course, the persistence of conflict continues to impede this development. Ultimately we can only imagine what currently unfolding trends the future history books will show.

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